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ABSTRACT

The present report is an expanded version of an earlier paper by the authors. Summing up last year's language maintenance study, it goes on to place the Study in its general context as a contribution to Navajo literacy. Following the report is a complete listing of the publications of the Study to date, with ED numbers and other information concerning availability. (AMM)

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NAVAJO READING STUDY

The University of New Mexico

Progress Report No. 8

LITERACY IN THE VERNACULAR: THE CASE OF NAVAJO

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Preface

After a lapse of almost six months, the Navajo Reading Study resumed activities in January of this year. Among the activities now in progress are:

Language analysis: The difficult task of correcting and revising the concordance of the speech of six-year-old Navajo children, which, when completed, will provide the data for orthographic and lexical studies;

Language census: Reliability, validity, and individual accessibility substudies and an attempt to complete the much more extensive six-year-old language census we began last fall; and

Writing materials: An initial exploration of some of the problems of writing Navajo-language reading materials from several different theoretical viewpoints.

The report presented here is essentially an expanded version of an earlier paper by Spolsky. Summing up last year's language maintenance study, it goes on to place the Study in its general context as a contribution to Navajo literacy.

On the last two pages of this report will be found a complete listing of the publications of the Study to date. The ERIC number for each is given; persons wishing to obtain back copies of reports now out-of-print can obtain them through the ERIC system.

Modern technological society demands literacy: non-literate peoples who wish for modernization must either work to develop literacy in the vernacular, or face the probability of ultimate language loss and consequent loss of identity. An unwritten vernacular language is most vulnerable to destruction when the legislative and educational systems, the economic life, and the mass culture are all conducted in another language. As Kloss (1966) points out, the only factor that by itself seems to guarantee the maintenance of a minority language is religious and societal isolation, something which occurs when a religious group shuts itself away from the rest of society, rejecting not just the language and the values but also mary of the inventions of the outside world. Such is the case with the Old Order Amish and some other German speaking groups in the United States. A second class of factors influence but do not decide language maintenance: a key item in this group is the existence of a language island. In recent years, with increasing social and population mobility, and the increasing effect of mass communication, only very large islands have chances of survival. Thus, the Spanish-speaking language island of northern New Mexico, the French-speaking one in southern Louisiana, and the German-speaking areas of Pennsylvania and North and South Dakota, were for a long time sufficiently large to maintain language without the support of other factors, but they are no longer able to do this. The absence of extensive literacy in the vernacular may well have been a factor in language loss in these areas, for, even though in each case there was a literary language available (and one with high status,

required for foreign travel or Ph.D. study), it failed to be maintained in the schools, the cultural life, the politics and the commerce of the areas once there was regular contact with the dominant language, and was soon replaced by English, at least in those domains.(2)

With North American Indian languages, the process of loss has been even clearer. Failing to develop as literate languages they have also failed to hold their own in other ways.(3) Acculturation and language loss have gone hand in hand. The case of Navajo seems to fit this paradigm. Virtually all written activities are conducted in English. Tribal Council affairs are conducted more in Navajo than in English although it is now recognized in most communities that a non-English speaking Councilman is at a disadvantage in Window Rock. But all records and all legislative documents are in English. Chapter meetings (something akin to the New England town meeting) are conducted in Navajo. But all records and requests are written in English. Formal Tribal Court sessions are conducted in Navajo unless one of the parties requests otherwise. But, again, all records are kept in English. Thus, despite what is probably the largest absolute number, and largest relative percentage, of native-language monolinguals of any tribe in the United States, the written business of the tribe goes on in English. In official life, then, there is acceptance of Navajo as a spoken language but all written activities are in English.

The communication media present a similar distinction. Most radio stations on the peripheries of the Reservation broadcast at least an hour or more in Navajo. The transmissions consist of country western

music (in English of course) with some news and announcements in Navajo and many advertisements in Navajo. The Navajo-language announcers, however, work from English scripts, translating as they go. The Tribal newspaper, on the other hand, is entirely in English and even the more recently established unofficial papers use English almost exclusively. Navajo words are used very seldom and, when used, are as often as not misspelled. A letter written in Navajo to the Tribal paper congratulating them on having run an advertisement with a few words of Navajo, was never published.

The institution most concerned with literacy, and thus the principal agency of the destruction of Navajo on the Reservation, is of course the school. Mass education is relatively recent on the Navajo: as late as 1948, less than half the school-age population attended school. It is only in the last fifteen years or so that enrollment has consistently been 90% or better. But, because the average age of the Navajo population is young, 17.5, this means that considerably more than half has now been exposed to education in English.

And it is school that is still the first main source of English for the Navajo. Most Navajo children still come to school speaking little or no English. (Spolsky, 1970). From our survey, in which we obtained reports on 65% of the children in BIA schools,(4) we found that 90% of the six-year-olds were judged not to speak enough English for first grade work. And in data covering just over half of the children in public schools, we still found a predominance of Navajo.

Overall, then, most children come to school speaking little or no English, but almost without exception, classes are conducted in English. There are relatively few Navajo teachers and not all of these are encouraged or allowed to teach in Navajo.(5) There are only two schools, the community-controlled school at Rough Rock and the BIA school at Rock Point, which even approach a school-wide program of instruction in Navajo-language literacy. No public school does so. Together the two programs mentioned may reach 1% of the Reservation school population.

Even when the educational system is ready to start programs in Navajo, the absence of written materials serves as a major barrier. Why there is no material becomes clearer when we look at the historical picture.(6) There have been a number of attempts at developing Navajo literacy. The earliest were the efforts of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries; by 1910, each had developed a separate writing system and had begun publishing materials. The Bureau's lay literacy program of the late 1930's was part of the Collier administration's new program of respect for tribal integrity which replaced the earlier policies of forced assimilation. For some time, it had been apparent that the children were not succeeding with a curriculum entirely in English, and it was also apparent that the vast majority of the adult population could not speak English. A practical alphabet was developed using for the most part the same symbols as the English alphabet.(7) A first primer was prepared in Navajo and other readers in Navajo followed. In 1940, the teaching of reading and writing of Navajo became part of the curriculum in some schools at least. Admittedly, the main purpose

of these bilingual readers was to teach English, but, for the first time Navajo was permitted after the child's entry into school, was even encouraged in the classroom. Children were often allowed to take their books home and read to their parents who got a new vision of schooling when they understood the reading of the Navajo text.

At the same time an adult literacy campaign began. The demand for teachers far exceeded the supply; nevertheless there were soon people in many communities who could read their own language, and it was proposed that forms and regulations be written in Navajo. The government began to translate articles for conservation, livestock management, and health. In 1946, a Navajo language newspaper was started that continued publication until 1957. Through the newspaper, concepts such as "sheep unit" were explained, and news of Tribal Council affairs, Tribal laws, and the outside world was published in Navajo. The second World War took much of the impetus out of the literacy program. For the first time, large numbers of Navajos came into sustained contact with non-Navajos--as servicemen and working off the Reservation. For the first time they saw that their lack of English placed them at a disadvantage. A public demand grew for more and better education and for education in English. This, in the context of a nation-wide distrust of differences as being un-American, and a governmental policy of transition to state Public schools, was fatal to the relatively modest Navajo language programs. They had all disappeared by the late 50's.

The Special Program for Navajo Adolescents, initiated by the Bureau in partial answer to these demands after World War II illustrates the place of English. It was noted that nearly half the school-age population were over twelve, and that there were great numbers in this age group who had had little or no schooling. Intensive short-term programs (five-year, and later six- and eight-year programs) were set up in ten off-Reservation boarding schools to teach these students "to speak, read, write, and think in English" with the basic purpose of making it possible for them "to obtain and hold a permanent job away from the Reservation." At first, interpreters were used in teaching but it was clear that Navajo had its place only to help in the teaching of English. Since there was little available material designed for the teen-age reader with limited English, a bilingual series, the Navajo New World Readers, was developed. Basic emphasis was on preparation for leaving the Reservation, something which called for a mastery of English; the use of Navajo was only means to this end.

But, by the mid 1960's, these programs for Navajo literacy were virtually dead, except for some adult missionary activity in adult literacy. The Wycliffe Translators have prepared primers, charts, and teaching aids, educational as well as religious in aim.(8)

Against this background, we may look at the effect on the language situation. Inadequate as most school programs aimed to teach English have so far been, there has then been steady loss of Navajo. We have tried to measure the extent and rate of loss in a study we made of the language spoken by six-year-old children coming to school in the fall

of 1969. Recognizing the importance of school itself as a factor affecting language loss, we chose to look at the six-year-old before he had been contaminated by the school situation. Whatever other measures of language maintenance may be used, one of the most important is the parents' choice of language to speak to their children. For instance, while one may find parents with strong ethnic or national or religious ties choosing to have their children learn an ethnic language in school or church, the fact that they themselves choose to speak English to their children at home is the best guide to their basic attitude. Similarly, when one finds a tribe expressing interest in having its language taught in Head Start programs and elementary school one is tempted to see this as evidence of a strong desire to maintain the language; but in fact this may reflect the situation that English is now the first language of the children. Official tribal policy in such a group may be language maintenance but the real home policy is to switch to English. Similarly, one finds another tribe refusing to have its language used in school, reflecting not the rejection of the language but a strong desire to retain it uncontaminated for home and in-group use. Home language decisions are more crucial than publicly expressed opinions.

In our study,(9) we used a simple questionnaire completed by teachers in schools on or near the Reservation. The teachers were asked to judge each Navajo six-year-old in their classes on a five point scale, as follows:

N: When the child first came to school, he or she appeared to know only Navajo, and no English.

N-e: When the child first came to school, he or she appeared to know mainly Navajo; he or she knew a little English, but not enough to do first grade work.

N-E: When the Child came to school, he or she was apparently equally proficient in English or Navajo.

n-E: When the child came to school, he or she knew mainly English, and also knew a bit of Navajo.

E: When the child came to school, he or she appeared to know only English, and no Navajo.

The data gathered from these questionnaires were then correlated with two measures of acculturation, the type of school and the distance from the nearest off-Reservation town.

The results of our survey permitted the following generalizations:

1. Overall, 73% of Navajo six-year-olds in the study (virtually complete for BIA schools, and including several of the largest public school systems)[(2)] come to school not speaking enough English to do first grade work.

This first generalization results from treating columns N and N-e of the questionnaire as the criteria for determining a child's lack of ability to do first grade work in English. When our entire sample (including BIA and public schools) was tabulated, the results indicated that 88% of the 1510 children in the Bureau sample were judged incapable of beginning first grade work in English, and 57% of the 1383

children in the public schools were similarly rated by their teachers. Still another way of looking at these figures would be to say that in Bureau schools, less than 1% of the children are English monolinguals, and less than 3% are English-dominant. Even in public schools less than 10% of the children are English monolinguals and less than 20% are English-dominant. Those who are not English-dominant (E or n-E) are Navajo speakers; most of those can be assumed to speak Navajo at home. Thus we found clear evidence that a large majority of Navajo children are still speaking their language at home.

2. The farther a school is from an off-Reservation town the more likely its pupils are to speak Navajo.

This second generalization follows the establishment of an index to indicate the relative ease of access of the various schools involved to off-Reservation towns. We determined our accessibility figures using Map No. 2345, "Indian Country," published by the Automobile Club of Southern California. Distances on improved roads were taken at face value, but those on gravel, graded dirt, and un graded dirt were multiplied by two, three and four respectively on the assumption that the poorer the road, the less convenient and the less certain the access--especially in bad weather. When we compared the accessibility figure for each school with an index of the amount of Navajo spoken by six-year-olds in the school, we obtained an overall correlation coefficient of .517. Considering there are many other potent factors accounting for language retention, this is quite a respectable correlation. This factor of accessibility also seems to account for the difference in

amount of English spoken in each of the five Agencies, and probably also for a portion of the differences between the Agencies found in academic achievement on standardized tests.

3. The farther children live away from Reservation population centers and/or paved or all-weather roads, the more likely they are to speak Navajo at home.

Generalization 3 also deals with a kind of accessibility but is best explained by the way a child is enrolled in a public school or a BIA school. The data bore out the hypothesis that public school children speak relatively more English and less Navajo than their Bureau school counterparts. As noted earlier, despite overlap and inconsistencies, the enrollment of the public schools tends to be drawn from Reservation population centers--from the emerging towns and government compounds--and from along the paved highways and other all-weather roads. They draw, in other words, from just the population one would expect to be more acculturated. Public schools themselves vary greatly: the number of non-Navajo students in the school and the number of Navajo students whose home language is English are probably both a function of accessibility. This finding contradicts Sasaki and Olmsted (1953) who discounted differences in types of schools: "Regardless of the type of school attended..., it is the Navaho with the longest attendance at school who have the greatest proficiency in English..." (p. 98). There are several reasons why they had to disregard such differences and we cannot. The one is that in 1955 on-Reservation public schools were in their infancy; none of the adults in their sample had attended public

school (p. 96-97). The other is that in studying only 86 adult males, with great differences in age, military service, off-Reservation work experience, length of schooling, type of schooling, and English proficiency, only the correlation between length of schooling and English proficiency showed up. In our study, where differences in length of schooling were at a minimum, a correlation between accessibility and English proficiency became apparent. And as type of school tends to be a function of accessibility, a correlation between type of school and English proficiency also appeared. Sasaki and Olmsted do cite something like accessibility by way of partial explanation of the apparently much higher level of English language skills at Fruitland than on the Reservation as a whole.

There are a number of questions unresolved in this preliminary study that we will attempt to cover in a later survey. First, we did not reach the entire six-year-old population. We guess that we have data on about 65% of the children in BIA schools, and 55% of those in public schools. The BIA schools missing are generally in less acculturated areas, and we did cover the two largest and most urbanized public school systems. Second, we did not allow for the effect of pre-school programs. We asked for, and obtained information about six-year-olds. More and more children are entering school earlier each year: the Bureau has a small number of kindergartens, and the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity conducts pre-schools in most Chapters on the Reservation. Some of these are beginning to reach children younger than five. Attempts to determine which children have had prior school

experience are extremely difficult, for teachers in the larger schools often don't know much about the child's home community. Thus the figures for six-year-olds include a significant number of children who have had some prior pre-school experience; if anything the language ratings exaggerate the amount of English learned at home. Third, it can be argued that because very few of the teachers are Navajo or speak the language, their judgement of their pupil's proficiency in Navajo is unlikely to be adequate. We are now studying the effect of this: we believe there are equally plausible reasons for arguing they will overestimate or underestimate knowledge of English.

Finally, as noted above, there is some overlapping and inconsistency in the essentially dual school system of the Reservation. Some children may ride some distance past a Bureau school to attend public school. Some children may board at a Bureau school which is some distance farther from home than the nearest public school. That the accessibility correlation is as high as it is is rather persuasive evidence of its explanatory power.

Navajo, we found then, is still the main language of the area, but as more roads are built, as more children complete school, as the Reservation is more exposed to the outside world, there is steady increase in English. And the absence of Navajo literacy is a potent factor in this shift.

Let us consider some of the factors that may explain the relative slowness of the development of genuine bilingual programs or of Navajo literacy. When reading and writing is an alien thing and associated

with alien elements of the culture, it is not surprising to find reluctance to associate them with one's most precious possession, language. But that this need not be so is evidenced by two strong vernacular literacy movements of the 19th century: Cherokee and Maori. In both cases, reports suggest that once the peoples were given the opportunity of learning to read and write in their own language they did so with great rapidity. In both cases there was an extremely high standard of adult native literacy. In New Zealand, for instance, over a thousand items were printed in Maori between 1815 and 1900; in 1872, Bishop Colenso wrote a text book for teaching Maoris to read English remarking in the preface (which was written in Maori) that seeing they could already read their own language so well, they should have little trouble in learning to read a second one. But school policy soon destroyed this promising development. Maori was banned from schools soon after 1870 and not tolerated again until 1930. Only in the last few years have there been any signs of encouraging its use again.

In the Cherokee Nation, the use of Sequoyah's syllabary spread with great rapidity. Within a decade or two, 90% of the Western Cherokee were literate in their own language. By the 1880's, the Western Cherokee were not only highly literate in Cherokee but also more literate in English than were the English-speaking population of the adjacent states, Texas and Arkansas. Extensive publishing in Cherokee continued until the government's confiscation of the press in 1906. Within the last decade there has been a revival of interest in written Cherokee and renewed religious, educational, and publishing activity.(10)

The literacy movement for Navajo at no stage developed the impetus of these other two movements; the pre-war campaign was too closely associated with the stock reduction program, the post-war program too closely associated with relocation to develop any genuine popular support. Literacy in Navajo remained an alien concept.

But there have been more recent attempts at reviving Navajo literacy. These newest attempts have more promise of success, for two factors are converging to support them. The first is the change in educational climate. There is growing evidence to support the notion that teaching reading is easier in a child's strongest language. Thus, it is possible to persuade educators that children should be taught to read in the vernacular. Evidence from such studies as Nancy Modiano's has convinced many educators that it is worth trying. With this sort of encouragement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been prepared to offer some degree of minimal support to two or three pilot programs. But even here, the limited amount of research data, as Venezky (1970) points out, leaves the issue in reasonable doubt. Faced with a situation where so many children still speak Navajo, there are two main strategies: native language literacy, or effective standard language teaching. Some reading experts tend to feel the solution is standard language teaching: while many of us with language teaching background find native language literacy more promising. Presumably, this suggests neither of the techniques has yet been shown to be effective.

The second factor is probably even more important, for it involves pressure from within the Navajo people rather than from outside. It is

exemplified by the community school movement: there is increasing pressure for the Navajo communities to control their own schools. The examples of Rough Rock Demonstration School and now of the Ramah Community High School are applying pressure to the BIA and state school systems to pay much more attention to the wishes of the community. And the newly developed Dine BiOlta Association is starting to become a force in education on the Reservation. So far, these Navajo groups have stressed the importance of the Navajo language. The programs are new and undeveloped, but there is a firm commitment to the use of Navajo throughout the school, to the teaching of reading in Navajo, and language maintenance.

For the first time, then, there are signs of pressure from the Navajos themselves for literacy in the vernacular: the next few years will tell whether the combination of educational need and growing nationalism will be enough to produce permanent results, and to lead to widespread literacy in Navajo.

Notes

(1) An earlier version of this paper, with the title "Literacy in the Vernacular: the Navajo Reading Study," was read by Bernard Spolsky at the Council on Anthropology and Education Symposium on Cognitive and Linguistic Studies, 69th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Diego, November 19, 1970.

(2) In other domains, too, probably: Tucson six-year-olds, speaking Spanish, give English color names when asked for their favorite colors more than Spanish ones, and many Navajo six-year-olds use English number-names as Navajo words, despite the existence of an extensive base-ten number vocabulary in Navajo. But color and number may be particularly susceptible to borrowing.

(3) Chafe (1962) estimated that only 40% of the 300 languages or dialects extant had more than 100 speakers, and more than half of these have speakers only of very advanced ages.

(4) There are now something like 55,000 school-age Navajo children, about nine-tenths of whom are actually in school. Of those in school about 45% are in BIA schools, 50% in public schools, and the remaining 5% in mission and private schools. Public schools are relatively new on the Reservation, having begun to expand only in the mid 50's. By joint agreement between the Tribal Council and the Bureau, public schools usually enroll those children within a mile-and-a-half (or a mile) of the school or established

school bus routes. The wide dispersion of the rural population and the relative lack of roads, causes the public schools to draw larger numbers of students from the emerging towns and from government compounds, and smaller numbers of students from rural areas. Even the latter tend to be those nearer population centers and/or paved roads. Thus the public schools enroll almost all of the small numbers of non-Navajo students and a larger proportion of the more acculturated Navajo students; the Bureau schools tend to enroll less acculturated students.

(5) A racial census taken by the U. S. Office of Civil Rights reports roughly one Indian teacher for every 200 Indian children in the Public schools of New Mexico---89 / 17,721 (New Mexico Review, November 1970). But these 89 Indian teachers are not all Navajo. Nor is there any assurance that the Indian teachers are teaching children of their own language, as can be seen by an analysis of comparable figures from the Navajo Area, Bureau of Indian Affairs. There one finds a ratio of roughly one Indian teacher for every 240 Navajo children, but roughly one Navajo teacher for every 450 Navajo children---91 and 49 / 21,942 respectively. Put another way, while perhaps one of every nine teachers (and one of every four administrators) is an Indian, only one of every twenty teachers (and one of every nine administrators) is a Navajo. We have no data for the Arizona or Utah public schools but know of no reason to think the ratios would be significantly different from those of New Mexico. The point is that despite a real increase in the

number of Navajo teachers, there are still, absolutely or proportionally, relatively few in the classroom with Navajo children. It is to be hoped that the increasing number of Navajos in college (over 1200 this year) will begin to change this picture.

(6) This section draws on an essay by Penny Murphy (1970).

(7) The unfortunate exceptions were the "slashed 1" (ɬ), the nasal hook (ɔ), and the grave accent (ˋ) which do not occur on English typewriters.

(8) A list of Navajo reading material available is given in Spolsky, Holm and Murphy.

(9) The study, reported in Spolsky (1970), was supported by the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Navajo Area Office, Contract No. N00 C 1420 2848. The follow-up study referred to below is being partially supported by a second contract, No. N00 C 1420 3462 and by a gift to the University of New Mexico from John Nuveen and Company.

(10) See Walker (1968) and White (1962).

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